REPORT ON THE SIDON CUNEIFORM TABLET

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It was a cause for much celebration that the seventh season of excavations at Sidon produced, among other archaeological treasures, a fragment of a clay tablet bearing a cuneiform inscription. It was the first to be discovered at the site, and indeed one of only a handful of tablets to have been recovered at all in the Lebanon, and it soon achieved considerable attention in the media.

A preliminary description by the present writer based on a set of excavation photographs concluded from the nature of the script that the tablet dated to about 1400 BC, and that it was most probably a wage list, or similar item of administration. Recent examination of the tablet itself in Beirut has confirmed that approximate dating, but has established that it is, in fact, an *inventory of objects made of wood.*

Find-spot

The tablet was recovered from around the doorway of what is a major monumental building of Late Middle Bronze/Late Bronze – i.e. down to 13th century - date (fig. 1, p. 106). Only further excavations in this area will help to clarify the context of this discovery.

Description

The Sidon cuneiform tablet is made from a type of crude orange-yellow clay with inclusions that is not particularly suitable for carrying cuneiform signs. The signs are not deeply incised, and owing to these twin factors are not always so readily legible. The clay seems likely to be a local material.

What survives is a fragment from the top left-hand corner. In terms of width, it represents approximately one third of the original, while the piece was broken off nearly halfway down, preserving eight lines out of eighteen or more on the obverse. This means that, very roughly, one sixth of the original document survives. The breaks are evidently ancient. Present dimensions (maximum in each case) are width: 1. 7 cms; height: 3. 5 cms; thickness: 2. 00 cms. A sequence of ruled sections survives on the preserved surface. All items (with one possible exception) are prefixed with the determinative GIŠ, 'wood,' establishing clearly the nature of the document.

Each entry is preceded by a numeral, between 1 and 6, with the result that the surviving inscription covers a total of twenty-nine individual wooden items. From obverse 7 in particular it is evident that the complete tablet listed more than one entry per line, and in many cases three entries could have been accommodated. This means, as a rough guide, that the original document could have recorded up to forty lines with two to three entries per line; that is, between 80 and 120 types of item, some in more than one example. This has implications for the likely context from which the tablet stems.

Sign forms, sign usage and language

The shapes of the signs, in general terms, fit within the Levant of the second half of the second millennium BC. With such a small sampling little can be concluded beyond that: the sign NÁ is perhaps the most diagnostic item.

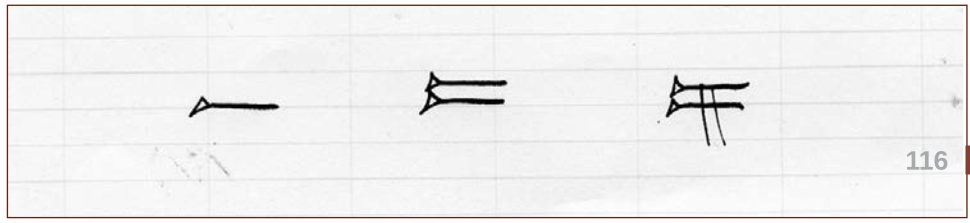
As in standard Mesopotamian cuneiform, itemized words here are spelled both in ideographic and phonetic form. Thus 'bed' is written ideographically GIŠ.NÁ, and 'door' GIŠ.IG, in which the old Sumerian signs NÁ and IG with these meanings, preceded by the explanatory determinative GIŠ to show that they are made of wood, stand for those words in the local language. A further case is probably GIŠ.PA in reverse 4', to write the word for 'staff,' since the spacing suggests that these two signs constitute a complete word. In contrast, the items in lines 3, 4 and 6 are evidently spelled phonetically, syllable by syllable, e.g. *ú-bu-u* [*t* ...]. While it may be assumed that the underlying language is Akkadian, there is no guarantee in fact that this is the case. Ideographic writings both in Sumerian and Akkadian are used at Böghazkoy, for example, to write words in the Hittite language, in the context of phonetically spelled Hittite. It is possible that they represent local Sidonite words, in other words. The issue is not settled, since the longest phonetic entry, *ú-bu-u* [*t* ...], looks like Akkadian *ubūtu*/*upūtu*, but cannot be identified as an Akkadian word on present knowledge. Other entries can be tentatively restored, but the issue is unresolved.

The cuneiform numerals found here are themselves of interest. Numbers 1, 2, 4 and 6 occur. Usage here at Sidon differs from standard, i.e. imported Mesopotamian, cuneiform practice in two respects (see fig. 1):

1 The numeral 1 is written with a long horizontal wedge, AŠ, rather than the invariable single vertical, DIŠ, that underlies the characteristic sequence, according to which DIŠ = 1, DIŠ.DIŠ = 2 etc.

2 The numeral 4 is written with two superposed long horizontal wedges, AŠ, crossed by two shallow vertical lines that do not show the clear head of a normal wedge. This, in other words, is to be analysed as two of the local signs for 1, doubled by means of an improvised double marker, that is: two '1's marked with two vertical lines, to write '4.' The explanation for this is presumably that use in a connected text of the traditional sign for '4,' formed of two groups of two small vertical wedges (i.e. 4 x 1) can theoretically suffer ambiguity, in that an identical arrangement of four wedges can mean both that numeral '4,'and the syllable ZA, with its various possible readings (za, ṣa, sà).

1 **2** **4**



1 The numerals at Sidon.

Compare here the contemporary device to write ‘4’ at Ugarit, which consist of a doubled vertical followed by two complete verticals (see conveniently Huehnegard 1989: 70 d. 4), again with the desire to distinguish the numeral from the syllabic sign ZA. (A comparable phenomenon is commonplace in Babylonian of the first millennium BC. Whereas Assyrian script uses one sign to stand for both the numeral “four” and for the syllable sign GAR, the Babylonians distinguish between a four-wedge version to write the numeral and a three-wedge version for the syllable sign. Here again the motive is presumably to avoid ambiguity for the reader).

These two phenomena together are suggestive. While there can be no doubt that the cuneiform system exemplified in this document owes its origin to the far older traditions of ancient Mesopotamia proper, both reflect some independence in the writing of numerals.

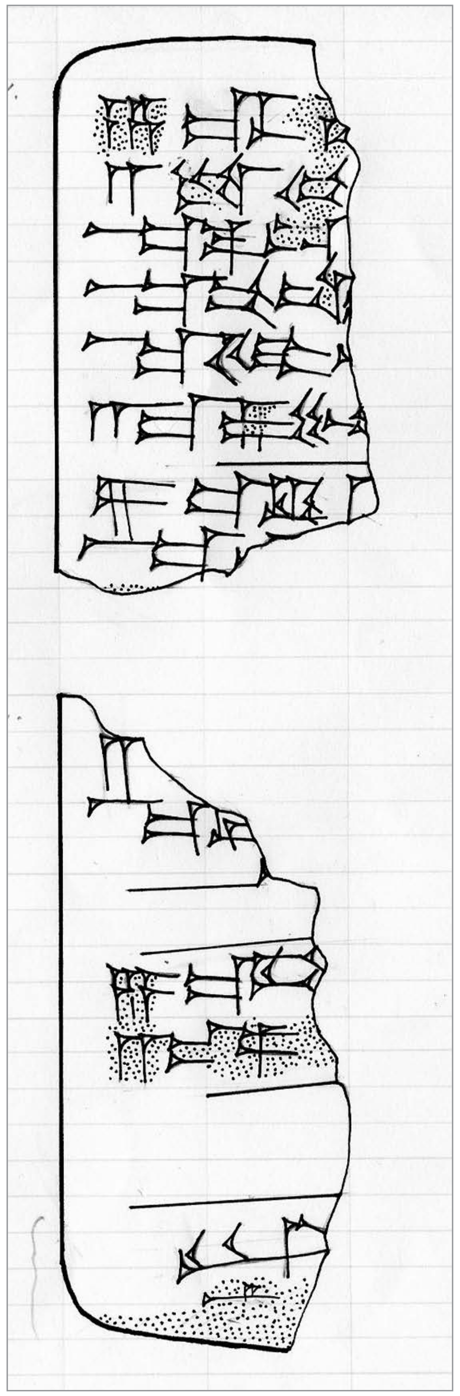
The final wood entry is followed by a ruling, an un-inscribed space, a further ruling, and a note at the end on the lower edge, of which only the ideogram LÚ, ‘man,’ survives, followed by an uncertain sign in the next line that is possibly just an erasure. There is, therefore, neither total nor probably date at the end, one or both of which would be expected in a counterpart from the Mesopotamian heartland, unless the final sign represents ⌈Mu⌉ [..., year.

Transliteration Translation





2-3 The cuneiform tablet obverse and reverse. See p. 85.



4 Hand-copy of Tablet.

Obverse

1	6 GIŠ *bar-*⌈*ha*⌉- […	6 wooden … [
2	2 GIŠ? ⌈*ul* ?⌉ -[…	2 wooden … [
3	1 GIŠ *ba*-x […	1 wooden … [
4	1 GIŠ *bi-ta*-x […	1 wooden … [
5	1 GIŠ.NÁ.x […	1 wooden …-bed […
6	2 GIŠ *ú-bu-u* [*t* …	2 wooden …*upūtu*'s […
7	4 GIŠ.IG 1 [GIŠ …	4 wooden doors; 1[wooden …
8	1 GIŠ x […	1 wooden …. […

(gap of 10 or more missing lines to bottom of tablet)

Reverse

(after equal length gap)

1’	2 [GIŠ …	2 [wooden …
2’	1 GIŠ I[B?-…	1 wooden …. […
3’	(uninscribed space)	
4’	6 GIŠ.AMAR-[…	6 wooden pan[els(?)
5’	2 GIŠ.PA […	2 wooden staffs; […
6’	(uninscribed space)	

Lower edge

7’	LÚ […	[The …] man/men
8’	x [….	…. [….]

Implications

Despite its size, the Sidon fragment carries many messages, and it is appropriate to consider some of them at this point.

Notes

1 No word *bur-ha-* or *par-ha-* seems to present itself.

2 GIŠ here seems to be written over partial erasures. The GIŠ *ul-lu* attested in Middle Babylonian clothing texts, Aro 1970: 35, 7, provides a possible model for restoring this word, which has been indexed under *ullu* in *AHw* 1410, and cross-referenced to *hullu*, q.v.; the basic meaning is 'ring.'

4 Akkadian words beginning *bi-ta-* are not plentiful. Were the numeral greater than one, a possibility would be *bi-ta-a* [*t*…, 'boxes of …'

5 Since GIŠ.NÁ is followed by a sign that is not a numeral, it is evident here that this is a compound, GIŠ.NÁ.x […], a specific kind of bed. One possibility is to restore the final sign as A[N, reading GIŠ.NÁ.DINGIR, 'bed for a god.' *etc.*

6 With *ú-bu-u* [*t* …, the underlying word could be *ubūtu*/*ubuttu* or *upūtu*/*uputtu*.

7 This line makes it clear that plural elements in this inventory were not necessarily marked with MEŠ.

4' GIŠ.AMAR [could be taken to reflect GIŠ *amartu* A in the meaning 'sideboard' of a bed, chair or chest (*CAD* A/2 3), although a spelling with the CVCV-sign AMAR - rather than *a-ma-ar-*[*ti*] - might be adjudged improbable in this context.

An inventory of wooden items, quite possibly numbering, as we have seen, a hundred or more items, some in multiple examples, seems likely to stem from the artisan side of the wood trade. We cannot know the direction of movement, or who was involved; the tantalising '[…] man' or '[…] men' noted on the edge, were it complete, might have given a clue, but given Sidon's obvious importance as a source of wood (see, e.g. several chapters in Doumet-Serhal (ed.) 2004: 448-547), it is surely more probable that these finished, and perhaps luxury goods were going out rather than coming in.

Such issues can only be clarified with the help of further examples from the archive. For it is sure that this must be an archive tablet, and one that bespeaks other records of similar type. This in itself is worthy of consideration, in that it implies a commercial use of cuneiform writing that has previously hardly been supportable or imaginable in Lebanese sites.

Compare for example Gernot Wilhelm, discussing the handful of roughly contemporary cuneiform letters from Kamid el-Loz, the Amarna-period site of Kumidi. He concludes on the basis of the very rarity of known documents that Mesopotamian cuneiform was not in use along the Lebanese coast at this period for legal and administrative purposes – in contrast to Mesopotamian and North Syria - but only found 'a niveau' for international correspondence (Wilhelm 1983: 40-42, for example). This argument cannot possibly have been true. Writing brought with it power and mobility in a hundred ways, and a map that shows restricted use for special purposes in some places only based on the accident of discovery is unlikely to be very reliable.

Imported writing from the Mesopotamian heartland had been available along that coast since the end of the third millennium BC, as witnessed by the high-quality practice lexical sign list now in the National Museum of Beirut, which was recovered out of original context at Byblos (see Dossin 1969: 245-8). Such a document, a list of signs that does not correspond to the 'canonical' sign lists known to us, and dating hardly later than 2200 BC, can only represent the deliberate import of writing in the hands of a Mesopotamian expert. As clarified in that publication by Thureau-Dangin, the tablet itself should be the work of a pupil. There must always have been itinerant scribes who would travel to make their fortune overseas, as well as rulers who would employ them, importing with them the basic sign list and lexical compilations that hadformed the backbone of their own education, taking pupils and distributing the word. The process is clear at Meskene, as has been recently studied by Yoram Cohen (e.g. Cohen 2004: 81-100). Given the prosaic nature of this new fragment from Sidon, one must consider that the situation must have been much the same there. Writing must have been used for an abundance of purposes, and can never have been restricted to one branch of activity.

5 Lower edge of tablet.



On top of this, the fragment indicates a certain freedom among Sidon scribes, who could develop certain practices for their own convenience independent of the long-established practice of the Mesopotamian heartland, as witnessed by the writing of the elementary numbers in this important new document.

ABBREVIATIONS

AHw: *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*. Wiesbaden.

CAD: *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*. Chicago.

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